In this special theme issue, Michael L Perdue & Tim Nguyen (246) look at the WHO public health research agenda for influenza two years from its initial publication. Nahoko Shindo & Sylvie Briand (247) discuss influenza at the beginning of the 21st century, while, in an interview, William Ampofo (254–255) tells Ben Jones why it is essential to track the burden of influenza in Africa.